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## PLAYS BY BRIEUX

**W**OMAN on Her Own has a special interest at the present moment, when more women than ever before are doing what is called "man's work." The play (in this translation by Mrs. Bernard Shaw) was acted in London nearly three years ago by the Woman's Theatre, under the direction of the Actresses' Franchise League; and we gather from M. Brieux's preface to this volume that the version then and now set before us is unknown in France, where, presumably, the picture needed toning down a little. Indeed, it is highly coloured—too highly coloured, in our opinion, not for decency, but for sense, for plain fact. *La Femme Seule* has—being a play by M. Brieux—a very practical moral; and, as usual with those who use art-forms for preaching morals, as usual especially with M. Brieux himself, the moral is not made good without some forcing of the facts.

If we believe *La Femme Seule*, there is only one profession at which a woman can make for herself a living. He is speaking, be it remembered, of the old world, before the war. Everyone will readily admit that the war, in England at any rate, has made a profound difference to the question of women's labour. The world simply could not get on without the women's help in factory and office and shop; and the need for this help has been recognized (so those who know will tell us) by fairly generous surrender, on the part of the remaining men, of opinions, prejudices, and privileges to which they clung before. But were things as bad, in France or England, before the war as M. Brieux would make out in this play? Here is an excep-

tionally intelligent and capable girl of good breeding. Suddenly losing her fortune, and with it, of course, her well-to-do betrothed, she takes first to journalism. The paper which she joins is unsuccessful. Her salary is halved and her hours increased. Well and good; that might happen to anyone, male or female; and Thérèse already has an introduction to a more successful periodical. But Thérèse has another trouble—the pestering attentions of her editor; and it is her loyalty to the man's unwedded wife that leads her to throw up journalism and take a post in a bookbinding business conducted by a relative in a provincial town. Here she does first-rate work, rises quickly, and forms a union of the women workers. That union is "smashed" by the threat of a strike on the part of the men workers; and Thérèse, dismissed in response to the men's demands, returns to Paris—to take up the only profession open to women.

Any one of these troubles might have fallen upon any woman. When they all, with others besides, fall upon one woman, one cannot help feeling that M. Brieux has loaded the dice. There were, before the war, hundreds of women making decent livings at journalism and in manufacture. Are we to hear nothing of them? The disabilities of women and all abuses of our civilization are better and more profitably studied in the average case than in the exceptional; but that is an idea that seldom seems to occur to your writer of tracts. In the course of the play M. Brieux's characters, especially Thérèse, make some wise and searching remarks; and in his preface M. Brieux says

the wisest thing of all: that the complications are owing to the education of the men. He means, doubtless, that women will receive fairer treatment and do better work when employers are educated out of playing off cheaper labour against dearer for their own enrichment, and workmen are educated out of squandering their wages and bullying their wives. But in a work cast in an art-form it matters little what anyone says. What tells is the general effect and movement of the work; and, while the movement of *Woman on Her Own* is heavy, pedantic, and laborious, its general effect is to arouse revolt against its coarse overstatement of a very good case.

Of *The Red Robe* we need say little, because some slight idea of the play will have been gained from the performances at a London theatre of something purporting to be an English version of it. Those who have seen that production will know that the play deals with something much less interesting and important to the world than the question of woman's labour—with certain weak spots in French criminal procedure. But they will also suspect that, local as it is in its "grievance," it is a much better and more moving play than *Woman on Her Own*. It has something, at least, of the universal appeal of a work of art; and the sorrows of Etchepare and Yanetta would touch the sympathy whatever their cause. This is still more true, in a different way, of the third play, *False Gods*, which has been Englished by the translators. The impulse to write this play, M. Brieux tells us in his preface, came to him during a visit to the miracle-working at Lourdes. Now, if we may say so, it would have been just like M. Brieux to write a play about Lourdes. His readers and spectators may bless the hesitation which held his hand until he had been to Egypt and

hit upon the scheme of giving his ideas a remote and ancient setting. The transference seems to have awakened his imagination, to have lifted his eyes and opened his spirit to the free airs of human life. There is light and shade in the piece. M. Brieux, for once, has not laid a heavy hand on the backs of our necks, that we may watch his every persevering footstep along a heavy road. The characters are human beings first, and not each a representative of some shade of opinion that must be fitted into the scheme. That the setting is picturesque and all but romantic (and, if adequately staged, with Saint-Saëns's music, it must be scenically very effective) has little to do with it. Somehow, M. Brieux here comes to life; and while discussing with wisdom and patience and from many points of view a very big subject, he makes a thing of beauty and passion. He worked hard at it, he tells us; he gave to it more thought and time than to any other of his plays. But more than thought and time went to the making of it: something that in M. Brieux is very often stifled—imagination.

The subject is miracles, dogmatic religion, an established Church, priestcraft, clericalism. M. Brieux glances at them all and labours none of them. There is no question about the broad effect of the play; it is strongly anti-clerical, anti-dogmatic. But M. Brieux here shows himself unusually sensitive to the contradictions and complexities through which he is apt to push unseeing. If the most convinced and ardent supporter of other old gods is a woman with a woman's passion for self-immolation, it is a woman, and a very devout woman, who at the close cries, "No, I do not believe in gods in whose name men kill." If it is the established Church, so to speak, with all its political and social power, which crushes the young reformer's work for truth and

freedom, part of the blame was due to his own weakness, which was born of the very strength of his compassion, and part, also, to his blundering followers, who thought to interpret his message in action before they understood it. Satni, the preacher, fell, leaving the priests to continue undisturbed their tyranny, their deception, their perversion to their own material ends of mankind's most powerful needs and impulses; but, in addition to the gleam of hope on which he closes his play,

M. Brioux has given us the spectacle of one to whom personal failure was not his cause's defeat. In so doing he shares in the spirit of Satni. Satni was not a great poet, a great dreamer; he is not the great conception of a lofty genius. But to have written this play entitles a man to be called a dramatic artist, or poet; and the works of the poets go on enlarging and liberating human nature when the tracts, dramatic or other, are long dead.

*From the London Times.*

### THE CAFÉ OF THE TROUSERS BUTTONS

EVERYBODY knows that a great deal of sugar is sold in Switzerland, where its cost is about the same as in France, while in Germany and, above all, in Turkey it is, so to speak, undiscoverable.

This discovery raised visions of delightful possibilities in the mind of a worthy Swiss merchant who, like other merchants, would be happy to profit by the war and realize a substantial benefit. For, after all, wars like this one do not occur every five years! One must find a way to profit by the occasion. And just then the occasion presented itself to our merchant, who received two car-loads of sugar at the very moment when he read in the *Gazette de* ———, his city, that sugar was selling in Constantinople at twelve francs the kilo.

Our good Swiss could not close his eyes without instantly dreaming that he sold sugar to all the Turks in all the Turkeys. Yes, but . . . When he descended from his dream and resumed contact with the realities, he asked himself how he could send his sugar to Constantinople. There lay the difficulty, because the Swiss custom-house would never allow the cars to pass.

It was then that our merchant received an inspiration of genius. He had his sugar made into . . . trousers buttons and buttons of other kinds.

The transmutation accomplished, the cars, loaded with furnishings for dressmakers and tailors, were allowed to depart for the Turkish capital. And that is why in the cafés of Péra, and also in the harems, one may hear the effendis and the odalisques exchanging remarks like these:

"How many buttons in your cup?"

"Three large coat buttons and two little trousers buttons."

*From La Vie Parisienne, Paris.*